DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 410 067 PS 025 761

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TITLE Parental Gender Concepts, Attitudes, and Role Division and Gender Development in Five- to Ten-Year-Old Boys and Girls.
PUB DATE Aug 96
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (14th, Quebec City, Quebec, Canada, August 12-16, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; *Child Development; *Childhood Attitudes; Children; Foreign Countries; Individual Differences; Longitudinal Studies; Parent Attitudes; *Parent Influence; Sex Differences; *Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; Sexual Identity; Socialization

ABSTRACT

The impact of parents as socialization agents for the gender development of their children is controversial in the literature. This study tested the assumption that parental socialization influences found to be of importance for one kind of variation in gender development are not necessarily the same as those that are of relevance to explain another kind of variation. A longitudinal study was conducted with 44 boys and girls, ages 5 to 10, and their parents. For the children, data were collected on the development of different components of gender typing; their mothers and fathers completed a questionnaire on gender role socialization. Results showed that although the gender concepts and preferences of most children reflected the typical gender roles of the adult world that were experienced by the children, the observed age changes in the gender typing of boys and girls and the differences between boys and girls in their gender development did not correlate with parental gender concepts and the parents' role division of household chores. However, the individual differences in the rigidity-flexibility of gender concepts and in the gender role preferences within the groups of boys and girls were related to the individual parents' gender concepts and attitudes, especially in mother-son dyads. No relationship was found between the individual parents' gender role behaviors and the inter-individual differences of children's gender typing. Results support the assumption that the impact of parental socialization influences varies systematically with the kind of variation to be explained. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/EV)

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PARENTAL GENDER CONCEPTS, ATTITUDES, AND ROLE DIVISION AND GENDER DEVELOPMENT IN FIVE- TO TEN-YEAR-OLD BOYS AND GIRLS

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Poster presented at the 14th Biennal Meetings of ISSBD,
Québec City, Canada, August 12-16, 1996

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ABSTRACT

The impact of parents as socialization agents for the gender development of their children is controversially discussed in the literature. Presenting data from a longitudinal study on children's gender development from age five through age ten, it is demonstrated that differences in the evaluation of parental effects on children's gender typing is mainly due to the conceptual vagueness in defining what one aims to explain. Usually, it is not clearly distinguished between factors thought as responsible for (a) developmental changes that boys and girls have in common, (b) differences between boys and girls, and (c) differences within boys and girls. It is assumed that parental socialization influences that found of importance for one kind of variation are not necessarily the same as those that are of relevance to explain another kind of variation. To test that assumption, selected data from 44 boys and girls who had participated in a longitudinal study on the development of different components of gender typing from age five until age ten, and from their mothers and fathers who had completed a questionnaire on gender role socialization, were analyzed. Although the gender concepts and preferences of most children reflected the typical gender roles of the adult world that were experienced by the children, the observed age changes in the gender typing of boys and girls and the differences between boys and girls in their gender development did not correlate with parental gender concepts and the parents' role division in household chores. However, the individual differences in the rigidity-flexibility of gender concepts and in the gender role preferences within the groups of boys and girls were related to the individual parents' gender concepts and attitudes, especially in mother-son dyads. No relationship was found between the individual parents' gender role behaviors and the interindividual differences of children's gender typing. The results of our study support the assumption that the impact of parental socialization influences varies systematically with the kind of variation to be explained.

INTRODUCTION

During childhood, all boys and girls acquire concepts or beliefs about gender-typed characteristics of children and adults (Huston, 1983; Intons-Peterson, 1988). With increasing age, the gender stereotypes become more flexible (Serbin, Powlishta, & Gulko, 1993; Trautner, 1992). Also, most children develop pronounced preferences for the characteristics perceived as typical for their own gender (Edelbrock & Sugawara, 1978), and they learn to see their ideal self as being one in accordance with the cultural gender roles (Trautner, 1992).Besides these general developmental changes, there are also individual differences in children's development of gender-related concepts, attitudes, and behaviors (Trautner, 1993).

A core assumption of socialization theories is that parents are the most significant socialization agents in the gender development of their children and in producing interindividual differences in children's gender-related concepts, attitudes, and behaviors (Fagot & Leinbach, 1987; Mischel, 1970; Trautner, 1994). However, reviews of the research evidence concerning socialization effects on children's gender development arrived at the conclusion that the relationship between parent variables and the thinking and behavior of their children is weak or mixed (Huston, 1983; Lytton & Romney, 1991; Trautner, 1994).

In this presentation, it is argued that the controversial evaluation of the impact of parental socialization on the gender development of children is due to the conceptual vagueness in the definition and analysis of the object of explanation. In dealing with the socialization of gender-typing in children, usually, it is not distinguished between

- factors responsible for developmental changes that boys and girls have in common
- factors that produce differences between groups of boys and girls
- factors that produce differences within groups of boys and girls.

We expect that parental socialization influences found of importance for one kind of variation are not necessarily the same influences that are relevant to explain the other two kinds of variation. To test that assumption, we analyzed selected data from our longitudinal study on the gender development in 5- to 10-year-old children (Trautner, 1992, 1993).

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 22 girls and 22 boys who had participated in a longitudinal study on the development of different components of gender-typing from age 5 until age 10, and whose parents (44 mothers and 33 fathers) had returned a questionnaire on gender role socialization at the end of that study. The families lived in or near the city of Frankfurt/M. (Germany) and were predominantly middle-class. The original sample was drawn from six German kindergartens in the area. During elementary school years they were distributed over eleven schools in the same area.

Measures

The test instruments administered to the children included various measures of gender-typing, among others: interviews on gender stereotypes, self-concept of masculinity-femininity, and gender role preferences. The parents filled out a questionnaire asking about their gender stereotypes, ideal traits of their own son or daughter, gender role preferences, the parental task division at home, and the involvement of mother and father in parent-child-activities. The measures used are described in Table 1.

Procedure

Each child was individually tested by a trained same-sex experimenter. A second experimenter of the opposite sex recorded the child's responses. The parents answered the questionnaire at home and returned it by mail.

Gender Measures of Children and Parents

Construct and Content Measured	Source and Kind of Measure
	Children
Gender stereotypes about typical activities and traits of boys and girls	Child's rating of 20 gender-typed activities and traits by dropping a card into one of five boxes representing a scale of masculinity-femininity Score: Number of flexible answers (both sexes or more of the typical sex)
Ideal self-concept of masculinity-femininity	Child's rating of 4 feminine, 4 masculine, and 2 gender neutral traits by dropping a card into one of three boxes (like to be so: always, sometimes, never) Score: Mean difference between ratings of masculine and feminine traits
Gender role preferences concerning toys, play activities, household activities, and occupational activities	Child's ranking of 6 items (2 feminine, 2 masculine, 2 gender neutral) for each domain according to liking Score: Total preference score resulting from summing up the four weighted domain-specific own-sex preference scores
	Parents
Gender stereotypes about typical activities and traits of boys and girls	Parent's rating of 20 gender-typed activities and traits on a 11-point scale representing different gender proportions Score: Number of flexible answers (40 % to 80 % characteristic of typical sex)
Ideal traits for own child	Parent's rating of 4 feminine, 4 masculine, and 2 gender neutral traits for own child on a 3-point scale (often, sometimes, seldom) Score: Mean difference between ratings of masculine and feminine traits
Gender role preferences concerning toys, play activities, household activities, and occupational activities	Parent's ranking of 6 items (2 feminine, 2 masculine, 2 gender neutral) for each domain according to liking for own child Score: Total preference score resulting from summing up the four weighted domain-specific gender-typed preference scores
Parental task division at home	Parent's answers on questions how often the own child can observe mother or father showing 7 gender-typed and 2 gender-neutral behaviors Score: Mean proportion of gender-typed role behavior
Parental involvement with child	Parent's answers on questions how often mother or father is engaged in 8 common parent-child activities Score: Mean proportion of mother's engagement

RESULTS

Age changes of boys and girls

Until age 7, all children adopted a highly rigid conception of the cultural gender stereotypes. Between ages 7 and 10, the gender stereotypes became more flexible, though the activity and object preferences of boys and girls remained highly gender-typed (see Fig. 1a and 1c). At the same time, boys' and, to a lesser degree, girls' ideal self tended to be more masculine than feminine (see Fig. 1b).

The growing flexibility of children's gender stereotypes from age 8 on corresponded to the level of stereotype flexibility in the group of parents (see Fig. 1a and Table 2). The ideal traits desired by the parents for their sons and daughters were less masculine than expressed by the children, i.e., rather gender neutral (see Fig. 1b). The activities and objects preferred by the parents for their sons and daughters were less gender-typed than the gender role preferences of the children, especially for girls (see Fig 1c).

Differences between boys and girls

Girls had more flexible gender stereotypes than boys, and, in contrast to boys, their ideal self was not oriented at their own gender role (see Fig. 1a and 1b). No sex differences could be observed regarding gender role preferences of boys and girls (see Fig. 1c).

While parents' expectations of the ideal traits and the preferred activities of their children tended to be androgyneous (similar description of the ideal son and daughter and of the preferred activities for boys and girls; see Fig. 1b and 1c, Fig. 2, and Table 3), their own role behavior concerning household chores, as well as their involvement in parent-child activities were traditionally gender-typed (see Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). However, boys and girls had the same experiences regarding parental models and activities.

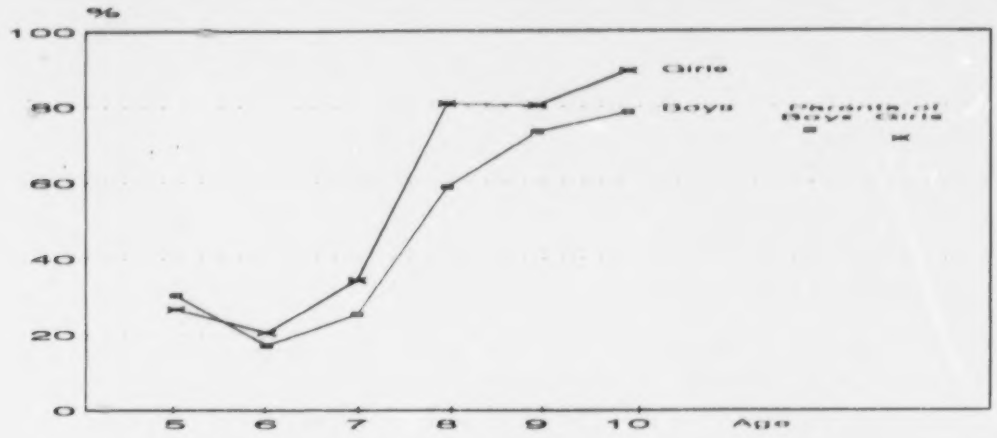
Differences within boys and girls

Individual boys' scores of stereotype flexibility and of gender role preferences at age 10 were positively related to their mothers' correspondent scores (see Table 4a and 4c). Also, boys' preferences for toys and occupational activities correlated with their fathers' stated preferences in these domains (see Table 4c). There was no relationship between boys' gender-typing of their ideal self and the gender-typing of personality traits favored by parents of boys (see Table 4b).

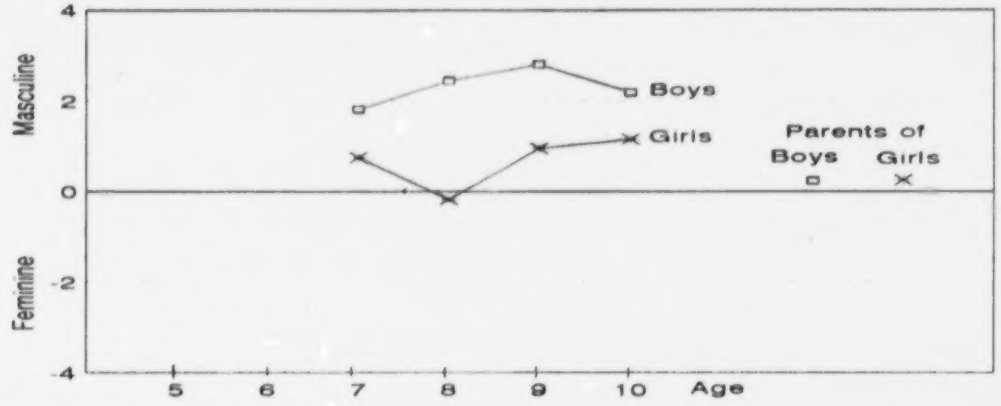
In 10-year-old girls, there were only positive parent-child correlations concerning toy preferences (mother and father) and preferences for household activities (fathers), and a negative relationship between girls' (slightly masculine) ideal self and the (more androgyneous) ideal traits stated by their mothers (see Table 4a-c).

No relationship could be found between the gender-typing of parental role models and of parental involvement with child and any of boys' and girls' gender measures.

a) Flexibility of Gender Stereotypes



b) Ideal Self-Concept of Masculinity-Femininity



c) Gender Role Preferences

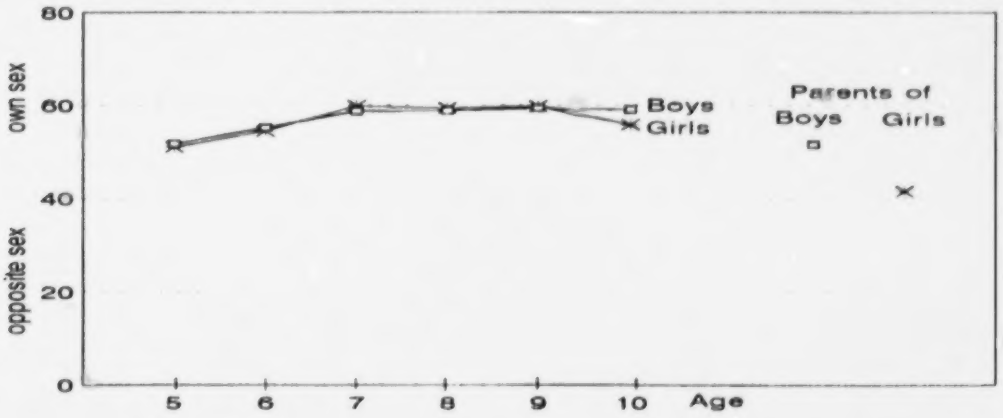


Fig. 1 - Age changes in gender-typing variables of boys and girls and correspondent scores for parents

TABLE 2
Percentage of Parent-Child Agreement in Answering Gender Stereotype Items by Age and Sex of Respondents

Child Age	Mothers of Girls	Fathers of Girls	Mothers of Boys	Fathers of Boys
5	33	35	33	28
6	30	29	29	24
7	41	36	37	35
8	72	68	61	60
9	71	66	67	72
10	75	74	76	80

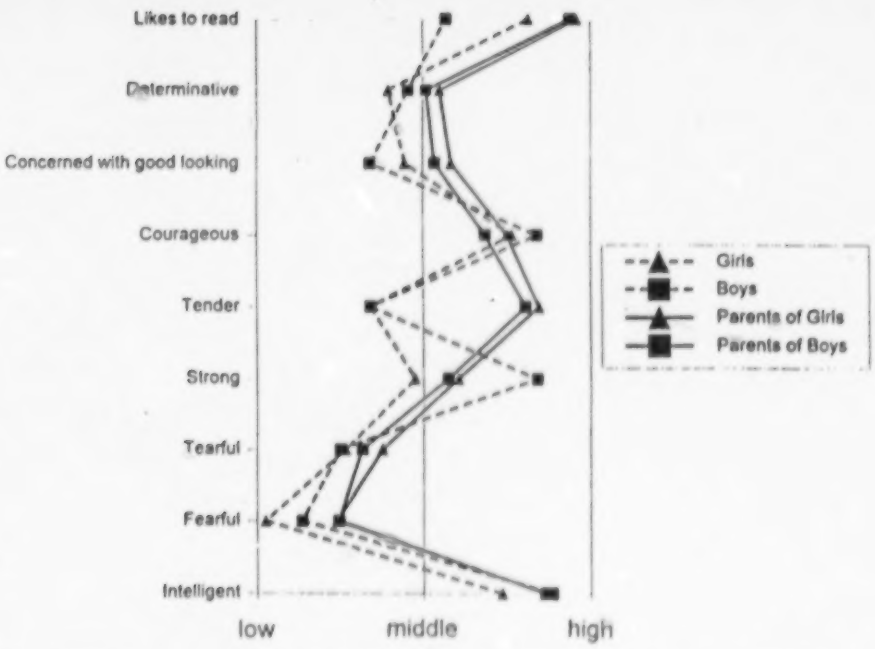


Fig. 2 - Desirability of gender-typed traits for own child according to parents' and children's ideal self concept

TABLE 3
Correlations of Preference Rankings for Boys and Girls

Domain	Correlation of Mean Ranks of Parents for Sons and Daughters	Correlation of Mean Ranks of Boys and Girls
Toys	.89*	.07
Play Activities	.60	-.81
Household Activities	.71	-.43
Occupational Activities	.89*	-.26

* $p < .05$

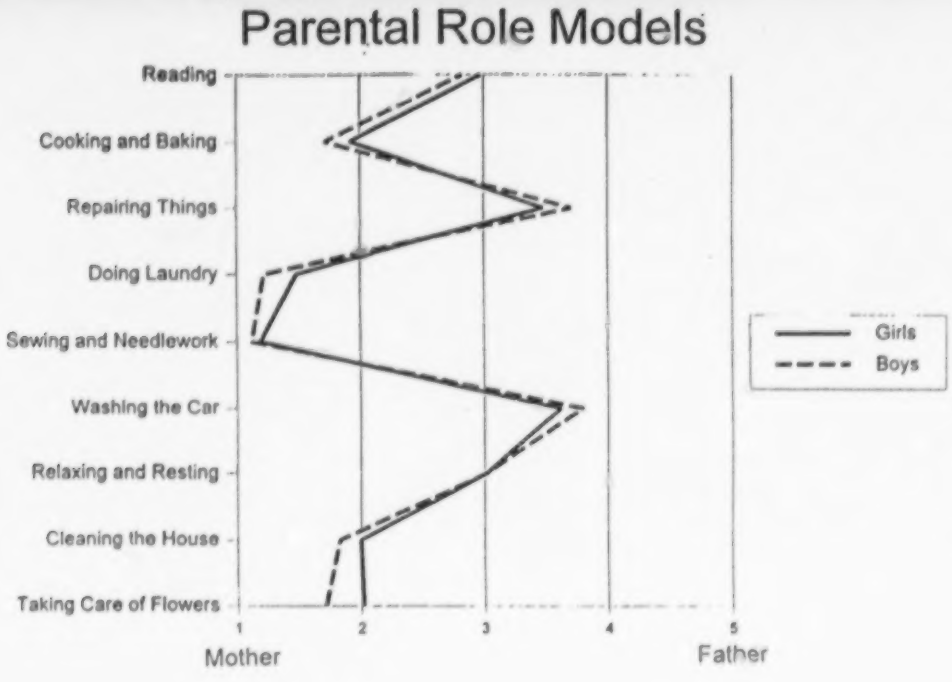


Fig. 3 - Gender-typing of observed parental behaviors at home

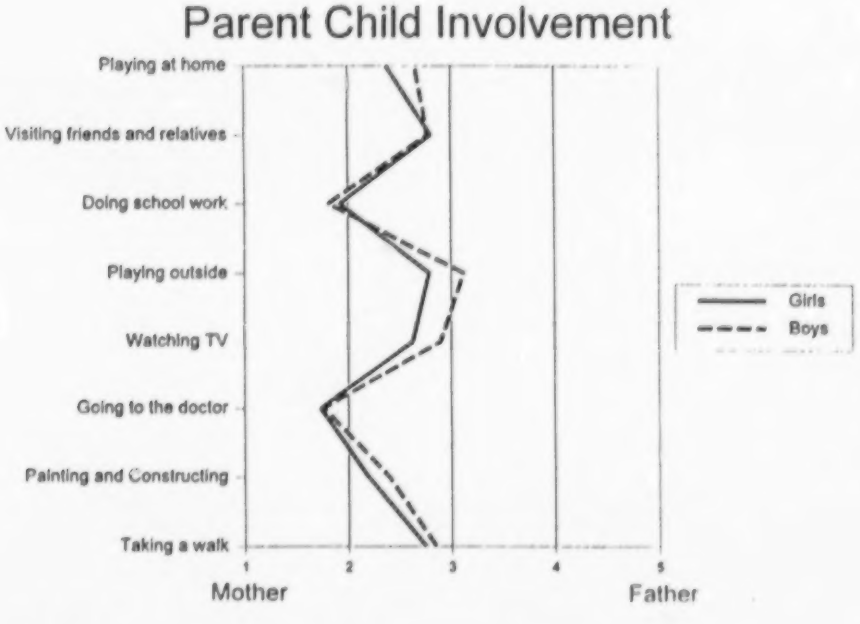


Fig. 4 - Mothers´ and fathers´ involvement in parent-child activities

TABLE 4
Individual Parent-Child Correlations at Child-Age 10 Years

	Mother		Father	
	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl
(a) Flexibility of gender stereotypes	.51**	-.24	-.21	-.14
(b) Gender-typing of ideal self	.04	-.54**	-.01	-.05
(c) Gender role preferences				
Toys	.66***	.52**	.75***	.57**
Play activities	.31*	.10	.19	-.04
Household activities	.39**	.40	.23	.33*
Occupational activities	.26*	.03	.56**	.24

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Note .- (a) and (b) Product-moment-correlations, (c) Median of rank-correlations

CONCLUSIONS

5- to 10-year-old children's gender stereotypes and gender role preferences were found to be widely in accordance with the gender stereotypes held by parents and the common parental role division observed in children's homes. Also, the developmental changes from rigid to more flexible stereotypes observed in children from age 8 on corresponded to the level of stereotype flexibility that was given in the studied group of parents.

However, the strong gender role preferences found in boys and girls across all ages and the masculine bias in children's ideal self-concept stood in clear contrast to the androgyneous description of the ideal son and daughter and the egalitarian preferences stated by parents, especially for girls. Further, the greater stereotype flexibility of girls compared to boys had no relation to similar differences in parental stereotypes and to parents' role division in household chores.

While the influence of the measured parental variables on age changes in the gender-typing of boys and girls and on differences between boys and girls seems to be restricted to the abstracted information about the cultural gender roles, the individual differences in the gender stereotypes and gender role preferences within boys and girls are related to the individual parents' gender concepts and attitudes. This holds especially for boys. As far as significant parent-child correlations were obtained, most correlations were found in mother-son-dyads. Thus, findings of a stronger impact of fathers on the gender development of their children (Siegal, 1987), could not be supported.

Corroborating the findings of other research (see Ruble & Martin, in print), no relationship was found between the gender-typing of individual parents' role behaviors and the variation of any of individual boys' and girls' gender measures.

Overall, the results of our study support the assumption that the impact of parental gender concepts, attitudes, and behaviors on children's gender development varies not only with the measured construct and content of gender-typing, but also with the kind of variation aimed to be explained: developmental changes that boys and girls have in common, differences between boys and girls, and differences within boys and girls.

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